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ABSTRACT

"Voice" has become a dangerous term. It has tended to imply romanticism, expressionism, and individualism--dangerous things. There are, however, two safe or prudent thoughts that can be expressed about voice and writing and four dangerous or adventuresome thoughts. The first point is that the choice between the use of terms such as text and discourse over a term like voice is not one between right and wrong but one between alternative lenses. The first two emphasize the interdependence of all utterances; the latter emphasizes individuality. Both emphases are useful. The second point is that voice, in several of its many usages, refers to ideologically uncontroversial concepts: audible voice, dramatic voice, distinctive voice, and authoritative voice. The four dangerous thoughts are as follows: (1) that to empower badly treated people and groups, academics must listen for the link between voice and self; (2) that composition must not privilege the reader's point of view at the expense of the writer's point of view; (3) that when the academic listens for intonation or J. Kristeva's semiotic, he or she is listening for the most "bodily" dimension of language; and (4) that anyone can produce writing that captures the attention and interest of readers, without training, without skill, and from the first day of class. Therefore, terms like romanticism, expressivism, and individualism are not very accurate ways of describing what is entailed in the concept of voice. (Contains 11 references.) (TB)

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Voice as a Light ning Rod for Dangerous Thinking

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ED 391 171

Voice has become a dangerous term. It has tended to imply romanticism, expressionism, and individualism: dangerous things. In this essay I will start by quickly summarizing two safe or prudent thoughts about voice and writing--safe but important. And then concentrate on four dangerous or adventuresome thoughts--dangerous but perhaps more fun.

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Nondangerous thought number one

We have a history of two contrasting terms for human utterance or language. The older term is *voice*; the recent term is *text*--also, *discourse*. All three terms are really lenses or metaphors. Each term brings out different aspects of human utterance or language--each lens brings different features into focus.

When we talk about writing as *voice*, we bring out the fact that it comes from individual persons and from physical bodies. When we talk about writing as *discourse* or *text* we bring out how it comes from the group or the culture or the system rather than from particular people--and how discourse is produced by other discourse in a process we call *intertextuality*.

The text metaphor highlights the visual and spatial features of language and emphasizes language as an abstract, universal system that exists all at once. The voice metaphor highlights sound and hearing rather than vision; and it emphasizes how linguistic meaning exists temporally or bit by bit over time (diachronically)--rather than existing simultaneously in space (synchronically).

The textuality metaphor calls attention to the commonalities between different people's discourse and the links between discourse and culture. The voice metaphor calls attention to the differences from one person to another. For example, one person's "cat" and another person's "cat" look very similar

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as text, but they sound very different as spoken or voiced.

In this century with structuralism, semiotics, Foucault, and Derrida, *text* and *discourse* have become preferred terms for many theorists. But in more recent years I sense a resurgence of interest in *voice* as a term.

The point here is that the choice between *voice* versus *text* or *discourse* is not a choice between right or wrong but rather a choice between alternative lenses. Both lenses are useful. To think that we have to stamp out one or the other would be a foolish kind of either/or thinking.

Bakhtin moves interestingly back and forth between the metaphors of voice and discourse--or perhaps we should say that he occupies a broad middle ground. One reason why so many people find him useful is that he writes about language in a way that emphasizes both the individual and the social: "And it is in intonation above all that the speaker comes into contact with the listener or listeners--intonation is social par excellence" ("Discourse in Life" 106). (See also pp 343ff and 348 of "Discourse in the Novel.") Similarly, he favors the term "heteroglossic" (implying tongue and voice [glotis])--and "dialogic" (implying the social and discourse). It's true that Bakhtin gives more emphasis to the social and cultural dimension of all language. Yet by using the term voice and tongue so much, he insists that the social dimension consists of living persons and bodies existing in time.*

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*"Where linguistic analysis sees only words and the interrelations of their abstract factors (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and so on), there, for living artistic perception and for concrete sociological analysis, relations among people stand revealed, relations merely reflected and fixed in verbal material. Verbal discourse is the skeleton that takes on living flesh only in the process of creative perception--consequently, only in the process of living social communication ("Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art" 109).

To summarize this first nondangerous thought: *voice* and *discourse* or *text* are equally useful terms or metaphors or lenses. Each one brings out different features of language and writing.

Nondangerous thought number two

Voice is a fuzzy, incantatory word, that is applied to writing in the most loosely, metaphorical ways. But if we distinguish among different senses of the term, we will find solid, useful, and clearly distinct meanings. In addition, we can see that four out of five meanings of voice are non-controversial.

1. Audible voice: is there a spoken sound tangled up in the words? Robert Frost was particularly interested here. He insisted that the only thing that makes sentences hold the attention of readers is "the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination."
2. Dramatic voice. What kind of person do we hear in the text? This is a completely orthodox concept in literary criticism: not the real author but the "speaker" or "implied author."
3. Distinctive, recognizable voice. Does the writing have a kind of trademark voice? Helen Vendler praised Sylvia Plath for having, at a certain point in her career, stopped sounding like Dylan Thomas and having achieved her own distinctive voice. Note that the concept of distinctive voice does not entail that her poems sounded "like her" or or resembled her actual biographical self. Just that they had a distinctive, trademark voice. Writers and critics sometimes betray a mystique about "finding a distinctive voice" but it seems as though one could be just as good a writer and have only Keats' negative capability or a chameleon voice.
4. Authoritative voice--or voice as authority to speak. Does the text

show an ability or willingness to speak out?--be heard? We see this usage in Women's Ways of Knowing and among many feminists. And also among theorists like Giroux interested in critical pedagogy. Notice, again, there is no "true self" here. I can speak out with vigorous authority without giving any kind of picture of my "real identity" or sounding like "the real me."

5. Resonant voice. Only here do we run into ideological dangers. Only here are we talking about the relation between the language and the identity of the actual writer. This is voice with implications of "true self" or "real self." Many people call this "authentic voice"--a term I've learned to avoid. I find "resonant" a more useful term because it avoids identifying this dimension of writing with "sincerity" or being "personal." Sincere and personal writing can be very tinny and non-resonant.

Thus, audible voice, dramatic voice, distinctive voice, and authoritative voice are solid and useful critical terms. I would argue that they are non-controversial, for they point to concrete, observable and definable features in texts. We can use these terms without getting into ideological dangers.

By distinguishing and defining different senses of voice, I am trying to rescue the concept from the widespread assumption that it is inherently permeated by a romantic expressivist ideology. Indeed it is important to point out that voice is helpful for a richly social constructionist model of the self--a self made up of strands or dimensions or parts of a constantly changing self. That is, it's hard to talk concretely about this slippery concept of a constructed self and apply it to the actual people and speech and writing we encounter around us: we tend to experience ourselves and others as normally single and solid. But if we want to actually see the way in which people have a shifting and fluid nature--if we want to do more than just spout abstract theory or doctrine about the nature of the self-as-illusion--nothing

is more useful than to notice how people have multiple and shifting voices in their speech and writing. Theorists can sound unrealistically doctrinaire when they say that we don't have selves, we only have subject positions. But when I listen carefully to the different voices in people's speech and writing, I can sometimes hear them occupying different identities or subject positions from which to speak or write or live. Bakhtin says our mouths are full of other people's tongues and voices. His metaphor is useful because the best way to "see" it is to hear those tongues or voices.

Summing up my second non-dangerous thought: voice is a useful and non-controversial term to use for reading and writing--and it needn;t carry any connotations of romanticism, expressivism, or individualism. It doesn't have to be shorthand for the Marlboro man. (He lost his voice to cancer.) It fits perfectly well with a social constructionist ideology. Voice would even serve the deconstructionist approach if they hadn't decided to consider the term itself negative.

Dangerous thought number one: the real me, not just the constructed me

To talk about "the real me" is now dangerous and contested, but i don't think we can't get along well without this concept. The need for it is most clear in the case of people whose language has been ignored, not heard, or oppresssed. Many people of color in our culture and in colonial settings and many women insist on the need for using a voice that they experience as their own. Partly it's a matter of not wanting to have to use what feels like the oppressor's language. The black writer doesn't want to have to use what he feels as "white" language; the woman what she feels as "man's language."

But that's not all. Such persons sometimes say they don't even want to have to use the voice that's constructed for them as a group or class. For example, bell hooks fights back when people tell her that her writing is most authentic when she writes "black" language. Many people of color and women

say that yes, they want to write as an African American or as a Latina or as a woman, but not for African Americans or Latinas or women. If you feel that your habitual voice is considered illegitimate or bad--or is simply unheard--then you are liable to insist that your very identity or self is involved in the voice you use. An issue of identity or self is at stake. Bakhtin too focuses on the process by which one can manage to wrest a voice of "one's own" from the voices or discourses of others--and he stresses that it is a process of struggle.

Listen to Gloria Anzaldua: "So if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. . . . I am my language. . . . I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice. Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue--my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence." She's not insisting that her voice or identity is single or unchanging. Quite the opposite. But she is insisting on a link tween voice and identity; that her language has to do with who she "really" is. Jackie Jones Royster made the same point in her presidential address at the 1995 CCCC convention.

Sophisticated members of the dominant culture and users of the privileged discourse find it easier to take the sophisticted line and say, "Oh don't be silly. Voice is nothing but roles. Actual identity doesn't matter." But it seems as though women and people from targeted groups are more apt to take what is sometimes called a "naive" line and say, "Wait a minute, my voice or writing isn't just a role I take, it has to do with who I am." I think I hear bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldua saying something like this. I think I hear Gilligan's longitudinal research going in this direction. (For the "sophisticated line" see Coles, Faigley, Gibson, and Hashimoto in my Voice and Writing. For a most sophisticated articulation of the so-called "naive" position, see Parks in the same volume.)

Speaking of targeted groups, notice how young people often say the same

thing. "My voice and writing aren't just a role I take, they have to do with who I am." We are tempted to laugh or even sneer when they say this in naive ways: "I need these overpriced universally advertised sneakers to express the real unique me." But I would ask us to stop and think about their assertion seriously--(if not necessarily paying top dollar for their sneakers). We may shrink from using the word "oppressed" with regard to children (though I think it very often fits), but surely they are the largest population of persons who are given very little autonomy. I think my own interest in voice stems from my own late-blooming resentment at being made to feel there was something wrong with what I experienced as my own voice in school--resentment at feeling tricked into selling out on my voice.

Notice how children are the ones with the loudest and most vivid voices. As a culture--and as parents and teachers--we exert enormous energy and force quieting them down. This is not surprising; they can be deafening and troublesome. But they deserve to be rewarded for using the voices that feel to them like theirs. We need to make school a place where students don't need to make an either/or choice between good thinking and a strong, loud voice--even vexatious voice. We can show them that it is possible to use their childish, naive, even vexatious voices and still do sophisticated, careful, critical thinking. Are not we ourselves, as academics and professionals, learning that we can use loud, vexatious, personal voices and still do good academic thinking and analysis? Academic discourse is breaking open to a wider range of voices.

Let me summarize my first dangerous thought: If we want a fairer society, if we want to empower badly treated persons and groups, we would do well listen for the link between voice and self.

Dangerous thought number two: the importance of the writer's point of view

In the field of composition, you'd think that the writer's point of view

would be dominant. Writing and the writer constitute our field. It is the ideology of our field that everyone can be a writer, not just special people touched with mysterious talent or genius. But in truth, composition theory is in thrall to the reader's point of view (perhaps because so much theory comes from literary and philosophical theory, or because teachers are primarily readers rather than writers). We see the dominance of the reader's point of view in the unthinking assumption that we can't really talk about the relationship between the text and the actual writer. "It's obvious," most people would say: "We can only see the text, we can't see the writer. We can't make any inferences from a present text back to an absent writer." This seems only common sense.

Well it's only common sense if we privilege the reader's point of view and stay locked in it.* For it is only the reader who has no view of or contact with the writer. If we would only look at writing from the writer's point of view, we would see that it is perfectly natural and ordinary and

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* Notice the role of intonation in my two versions of the same phrase. "This seems only common sense. Well it's only common sense if. . ." Notice the paradox: "only common sense" has two completely different meanings, but those meanings are signaled only by sound, not by text--yet one can get text to reflect those differences in sound: intonation exists in speech, not in writing, yet one can get intonation into writing. Let me extend this paradox: we can help students improve their writing when we help them exploit and pay more attention to and enjoy the living intonation of language. We do this not just through writing but through activities that involve speaking their words out loud and even using gesture and movement and role-play. "In intonation, discourse comes directly into contact with Life. . . . There is no such thing as the word without evaluative accent" (Bakhtin "Discourse in Life" 106, 103).

rational to talk about the the relationship between the text and the writer. As writer, we are sitting there with complete contact with both text and writer. Once we notice this, we realize that as writers, we use this dangerous sense of voice all the time: we talk all the time about the relationship or match between the text and our thinking, our intention, our feeling, and who we are. Theory is different when you get out of the reader's chair and try sitting in the writer's chair. (We would see a similar change in theory theorists tried looking at things from the teacher's point of view. If we theorized as teachers, we would see that we must abandon this same critical truism that readers can't talk about the relationship between text and writer. As teachers we talk every day about the relationship between texts and their authors.)

I want to seize on this foray into the writer's point of view as a source of leverage. For with this leverage I can show that most people do not actually believe what is allegedly common sense (or academic common sense), namely that it is impossible even for readers to make inferences from the present text to the absent writer. The only people who really believe this are people who believe that it is impossible to have any knowledge of other minds or persons. That is, most of us believe that we can have knowledge of other minds. And in believing this, what do we take as the source of our knowledge? Presumably we start from knowledge of ourselves--from introspection--that is, from occupying our own point of view. This is exactly what we do when we look at our own writing from our own point of view--occupying the writer's point of view. Then we make inferences and analogies from our own behavior and words to the behavior and words of others--concluding that others can be known as people like us. That is, our only knowledge of other persons comes from "reading" their behavior and words. And it is important to notice that we are not naive readers in this process. We don't take every piece of behavior and language at face value. We learn to make guesses about when to trust whether

someone's words or deeds matches what's on their mind. Admittedly, writing is a little harder to "read" than speech and physical behavior--but this is only a matter of degree and of practice, not a matter of kind. As readers, we apply to texts the skills we learned in our encounters with behavior and speech. In this process we learn to make the same kinds of guesses about when to trust and when not to trust someone's words--we learn to hear more and less presence of the writer in his or her text.

In short, if we believe we can have any knowledge of other persons at all in the world, we must acknowledge that we are reading inferences about the relationship between their "texts" and their "selves." Of course there are difficulties in this reading process. We make mistakes all the time. But my point is that most of our interactions with other people really involve using "voice" in this dangerous sense of the term--making inferences about the relationship between present texts and absent selves.

In short, if people want to say that it makes no sense to talk about the relation between the text and the writer behind the text, they can only claim this in good faith if they affirm two conditions: first, that they never look at writing from the writer's point of view (which is almost to admit that they never write); and second that they believe it is impossible to have knowledge of other persons.

So my second dangerous thought can be summarized as follows: We need to free composition from privileging the reader's point of view and neglecting the writer's point of view. When we do so, we will find it natural, as theorists, to do what most people and most good readers have always done--namely to make inferences about the relation between the text and actual person who wrote it. The more we feel ourselves and our students as writers, the more we will find that we cannot get away from this interest in voice. It is striking, after all, that writers have mostly proved immune to this scholarly skepticism about the concept of voice.

Dangerous thought number three: about culture, language, intonation, & body

Everyone pretty much agrees that everything is mediated by culture: language, thinking, identity, even our body. *Mediated.* What does that term mean? "That culture affects everything, seeps into everything, transforms everything." Most of us would agree with this translation of *mediated.* But would most of us agree with the following translation? "That culture takes total control of everything we think or say or do. That we are complete automatons of culture." I suspect not. I suspect that most of us believe that culture doesn't have complete control, and doesn't exert equal force everywhere. So the interesting question becomes this: where are the cracks? Where are the points of leverage?

That is, I'm interested in the gaps or cracks where the control of culture is not total. These cracks give us leverage for resistance; for not being completely ruled by culture. Yes, I'm interested in community, interested in solidarity with my cultures or communities; but also in the ability to resist. (Notice, by the way, that the more cultures or discourse communities we are part of, the more voices we have at our disposal, the more choices we have, the less leverage we need for resistance to any one of them. I won't pursue this further here, but see Mary Louise Pratt on "contact zones.")

If we are looking for cracks where culture has a bit less force, we would do well to look at voice. In particular let's look at the difference between language and the body. The point here is that culture has more complete influence on language than on the body. Language is a creation of culture; we might even call language a map of culture. But culture doesn't seep quite as deeply or fully into our physical bodies as it does into our language. My body and its functioning and impulses are not quite as completely shaped by culture as my language is. Therefore, when we listen for voice in writing--

especially one major dimension of voice, namely intonation (and of course we can listen for intonation in speech), we are listening for the most bodily dimension of language.

Kristeva made this point most pointedly when she distinguished the symbolic realm of language from the semiotic realm. By the symbolic, she meant that dimension of language which is most controlled by culture and convention, that which is most rule driven--most associated with the law, the law of the father, with society and power. The other dimension she calls the semiotic (an unfortuate choice of terms, I'd say): the realm of the body, the pre-oedipal child, the primary processes, the realm of the rhythmic, the repetitive, the spasmodic. (Translators carry over her word "pulsions." I can't resist thinking of the character Kramer, in the TV show Seinfeld, as a vivid illustration of someone who gives stronger than usual play to the semiotic.)

Does Kristeva seem too French or too extreme? I don't think so, but perhaps it will help some people to realize that Bakhtin makes a similar point in a more restrained way when he develops his preoccupation with intonation: the ups and downs of language, the tunes and rhythms in our utterances. He writes: "Intonation always lies on the border of the verbal and the non-verbal, the said and the unsaid" ("Discourse in Life" 106)--putting the entire sentence into italics. He talks about intonation "pumping life into language," and says intonation is "where language meets life."

In short, if we listen for voice in writing, we are listening for intonation, and if we are listening for intonation we are listening for the most bodily dimension of language--the dimension where we are most likely to find cracks between the self and the culture, or between what Kristeva calls realm of the body and its drives, instincts, and impulses on the one side, and on the other side the realm of the law, convention, and power. Kristeva tells us that if we listen carefully to language or writing, we can hear the places where there is more pressure from the semiotic--the realm of the body and

drives and what is less culturally dominated. If in our own writing--or our students' writing--we try to make more of a place for intonation, we will make more space for what is less culturally controlled.

This train of thought gives me a way to understand an approach I've always instinctively taken. In reading or listening to others, especially to students, I'm always listening for the voice that doesn't fit. When someone is talking or writing along but then lets out a little blurt or blip or squeak or screech, my ears always perk up. I'm talking about passages with stronger than usual intonation--or a sudden shift in intonation; and also passages that don't fit the context or audience or assignment, or don't fit the voices around it. When I hear these bits I tend to feel that something interesting is happening. In student writing, I'm always instinctively listening for passages where something unfitting is happening--even something unwitting.

That's why I've always been interested in bad writing--and always celebrated the necessity for bad writing: writing that doesn't fit the audience or context; writing where the guard is let down or something is blurted or burped. In places like these, I tend to get a sense of having a bit more contact with the writer; a sense of greater than usual presence. I'm always drawn to these passages. They always feel more fertile to me, whatever their faults--not just psychologically fertile, but intellectually, cognitively, academically.

When I follow my interest in intonation and in these blurts of language that don't fit--with my interest in presence--I sense two things happening. First, the more people are listened to, valued, supported, trusted--not judged or criticized--the more intonation they produce and the more of these blurts or linguistic eruptions. Second, when I express interest in these passages and communicate to the writer my sense that there's something valuable and worth trusting in them, I think it leads students in the direction of acting less like robots for the culture.

This is slippery ground here; I said this was dangerous thinking. I am talking about more support and trust for students when they let down their guard. I need to acknowledge two consequences.

First, I'm not saying that this process leads immediately to better writing. It often makes things worse. But I think it leads to better ingredients for good writing: more interesting and conflicted thought and more lively language. Still, the immediate result tends to be more disruption, more contradiction, more confusion, more perplexity.

Second, rewarding intonation can lead not only to bad writing, but to bad views. The culture has plenty of intonation; Rush Limbaugh is a master of intonation. (He has plenty of audible, dramatic, distinctive and authoritative voice. But resonance? I'd say no.) So when I try to support intonation and provide an atmosphere of listening and safety and affirmation, I will hear some of the culture's ugly, noxious views. I have to try to serve opposing goals: I'm trying to build a community of trust and support, yet I have no hope of a trusting community unless I forcibly legislate against disrespectful and abusive language. (I find it helpful to exploit the resources of private writing here. While I refuse disrespectful and abusive discourse that is public, I explicitly invite students to explore these thoughts and feelings in private writing--to see if they can thereby understand better what they mean and where they come from and what effect they have.)

Kristeva says that the best realm for the semiotic is imaginative writing: poetry, fiction, role-playing various voices. June Jordan also insists on people's capacity to use language to get beyond cultural scripts when she describes the course she teaches at Berkeley called "Poetry for the People," :

> . . . the underlying idea is that every person needs to know how to write poetry because that means that every person will know what it is to be accurate about what she or he feels or thinks or needs, so that she or he takes command of this common currency, our language. [my

emphasis]

Everybody has something that he or she needs to say that is dangerous, to him or to the world. Everyone needs to tell the truth, to respond to interior imperatives in a way that the rest of us can understand--to say or discover those important things that are scary and to shape them in words as powerfully as possible, whether that means to come out with something that's beautiful or unforgettable or arresting or whatever.

Over the years of teaching poetry, I have found that, when students get to the place where they're writing whatever is disturbing for them, something happens that empowers them in a way that means they'll never be the same. You can never silence them again. And they make connections when they read that change to the audience--everybody witnesses that person jump off a cliff--everybody knows."

My third dangerous can be summarized as follows: If we listen for intonation and Kriteva's semiotic, we are listening for the most bodily dimension of language. And we are listening for the cracks between the culture and the self.

Dangerous thought number four: anyone can do it

Frost suggests that voice is the most powerful force that captures readers. Let's take this a step further. This ability to capture readers with voice has nothing to do with what we usually think of as ability or skill in writing: neither with good thinking nor with command over the rules or conventions of writing. The most unskilled students are capable of getting this power of voice into their writing--immediately. Indeed, sometimes the unskilled do it more quickly--the almost illiterate. Certainly we see it in children's writing. Unskilled and illiterate and child writers are less

likely to conform to all the literacy conventions that have the effect of removing traces of the oral from writing.

Frost was mostly emphasizing the audible and speech-like qualities in writing. I'd say that the power comes in addition from another dimension of voice: resonance or the sense of the writer's presence in the text. I think readers are captured when they sense they are having some kind of genuine contact with the writer through the text--across the gulf of space or time.

If I am right about this there are some powerfully pragmatic implications for teaching. That is, our main job as writing teachers is indeed to get our students more skilled in thinking and in their command over the rules and conventions of the code. But the only way to get them to learn these difficult writing skills is to get them to work at it--which means to want to work at it. We don't have much luck with uninterested or unwilling students.

Probably the most powerful way to make students want to work at the difficult skills in writing is to give them some experience of success in writing: the experience of writing something that captures the attention and interest of readers; the experience of pleasure at having written something that readers actually want to read. From this it follows that we should work on voice right from the start. Students can get voice in their writing before they get any better at thinking or more skilled with the conventions. With this success, they will feel more like writers--that is, like people who enjoy writing and want to do it better.

So my fourth dangerous thought is this: Anyone can produce writing that captures the attention and interest of readers--without training, without skill, and from the first day of class. I don't mean this happens easily. I'm not claiming I can regularly produce it. It requires safety and trust in the classroom and great courage and self-trust in the writer--and these are not easy to come by in most school settings. But I have found it enormously helpful for my teaching to know that each of my students is capable of it from

the first day.

To sum up

Voice has become a dangerous term. It has tended to imply romanticism, expressivism, and individualism--all devil terms. I'm always tempted to try to fight this labeling. "Who me? Romantic, expressivist, individualist? Little ol' me?" I feel the need to try to show that these terms are not very accurate ways to describe what is entailed in the concept of voice. (For my attempts, see Elbow.) But finally it strikes me that I shouldn't spend all my time trying to be careful and trying to show that I'm not guilty of the sins of romanticism, expressivism, and individualism. Better to forget about the danger and go down this path of exploration. Perhaps some more accurate concepts will emerge from the discussion. Perhaps the term *voice* itself can lead us out of some of our theoretical ruts.

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